

FIGURE 2: Detail of Beers' Atlas, showing Cooper's Corner as it appeared immediately after the Civil War. Two houses are identified as belonging to "Mrs. Cooper" at this time. The lower one, on the left, stood on the present Governor's Avenue. The upper one is now known as The Nuts, K-222, 1068 South State Street.

Introduction

The Delaware Department of Transportation proposes to improve the intersection known as Cooper's Corner, where South State Street in Dover crosses the four-lane U.S. Route 13. This improvement is only the latest in a series of changes that the intersection has undergone during the twentieth century.

Before the present century, all land travel south through Delaware went through Cooper's Corner. The road to Forest Landing, Dover's deepwater port, passed through here. During the eighteenth century, noteworthy local citizens lived on the Cooper's Corner farm.

Description of the house K-222

The Cooper mansion house is a five-bay brick and frame structure with two rear wings. The first floor is currently occupied as a restaurant, while the rest of the building is unoccupied. The front section is 2 1/2 storeys high, with shed-roofed dormers front and back. The left (south) three bays are brick, covered with ashlar stucco. The right (north) two bays are brick with ashlar stucco on the first floor and frame with shake siding on the second and attic storeys. The footing is brick, but it rests on a cement-block walled basement. A rear ell projecting from the northwest side of the house is a one-storey building with an attic and the remains of an exterior end chimney. A modern rear masonry kitchen wing extends from the southwest corner.

Inside the first floor, no evidence of original plan or trim survives at all. Restaurant and cocktail lounge decor have obscured all detail. Access to the basement is reached through a trapdoor. A flight of old basement stairs rises in the center of the front section, echoing the old central stairs that survive on the upper storeys. The basement of the south section retains a few early hewn timbers, but most of the floor joists are sawn replacements. The south cellar floor is paved in brick. The north cellar appears to be a recent excavation, containing an unused furnace. The northwest wing's brick footing and crawlspace can be seen through an opening in the north cellar. This wing, probably a detached kitchen originally, actually stands a foot or so behind the north section of the main house.

Since the staircase has been removed from the first floor, one gains access to the upstairs by a newer door on the rear outside. The second and third floors of the main section retain the center-staircase plan typical of Delaware rural houses. The surviving trim is Victorian. The attic storey is finished and sheathed in plywood, which prevents detailed examination of the structure.

The attic of the one-storey wing is accessible from the north room of the second floor. A small window in the brick (west) endwall next to the chimney has been closed up. The roof structure consists of old pegged rafters, which have been whitewashed. These rafters have been scabbed to support a more recent structure of shingle lath and wooden shingles. Since the scabs were nailed over the whitewashed rafters with cut nails, the rebuilding of this roof probably occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A plaster ceiling has been attached to the rafters.

Because of extensive rebuilding at various periods, it is almost impossible to provide an estimated construction date for the house on architectural grounds alone. From documentary and architectural evidence, it certainly existed at the time of the Civil War. A farmstead had already existed on this location for at least a century. The Nixon and, likely, Kearney toft must have occupied the same location if not the same building.

Physical geography and environment

Cooper's Corner lies in the marshy valley of Puncheon Run or Walker's Branch, a perennial stream that has been used as a power source. The original floodplain of Puncheon Run has been filled in recent years, primarily by construction of the first Dover By-Pass, Route 13.

The main road south from Dover forked at Cooper's Corner. The left, or eastern branch, went south over Moore's (formerly Perrin's or Molleston's) mill dam on Isaac's Branch, and then to Forest Landing (later Lebanon). U. S. Route 113 follows roughly the same course today between Cooper's Corner and Moore's Mill.

The right, or western, fork of the road went to Camden and thence downstate. Its original course ran westward along Puncheon Run, crossing the stream almost due west of the intersection. Ascending the hill, it then turned southwest along the present course of Governors Avenue extended. The section of Governors Avenue between Water Street and Puncheon Run is a relatively recent development.

The bridge on the Camden Road crossed Puncheon Run on relatively high ground, but the road to Forest Landing crossed a broad cripple, some of which remains undisturbed. On the south side of the valley, this road climbed a steep hill. Puncheon Run was capable of generating enough power for a sawmill, since one operated between Route 113 and St. Jones River before 1820.

Highway history in the project area

Cooper's Corner was originally defined as the intersection of the two main roads south from Dover. Virtually all the state's ground transportation southward passed through the intersection. The main road, or highway, was the road to Camden, which bore west at this point and followed roughly the present course of U. S. Route 13. The other road, now State Street extended, went to Forest Landing (Lebanon), Dover's seaport.

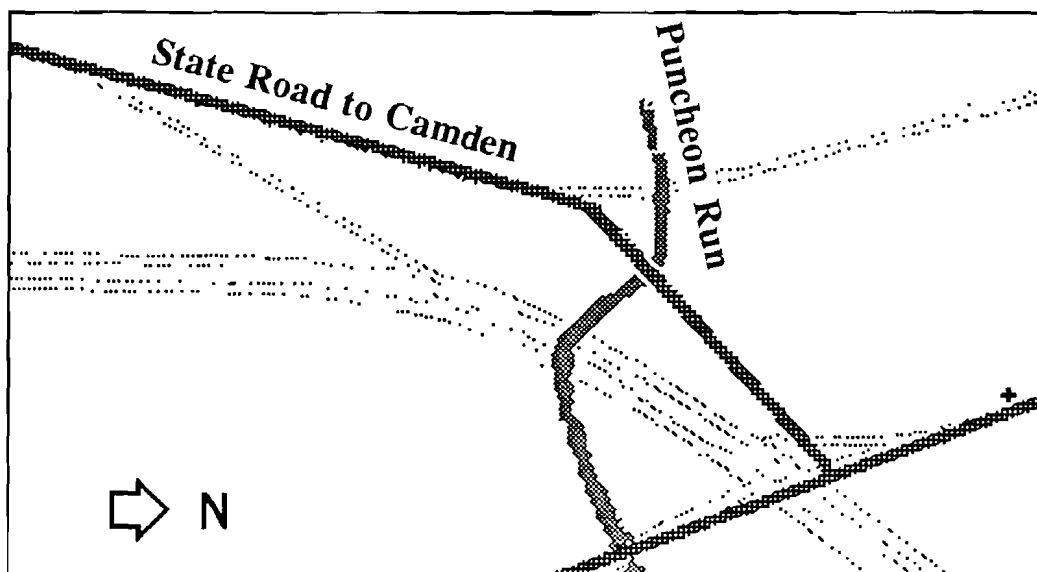


FIGURE 3: Sketch map of roads through Cooper's Corner before 1919. The modern road network is shown in light shading. The Cooper house is indicated by a cross at right. The road to Forest Landing, now U. S. Route 113, is at bottom, while the main highway to Camden is at the top.

The first change at Cooper's Corner was the construction of a new highway in 1919. Known as the duPont Parkway, Route 113 below Dover would have far-reaching impact upon the economy of lower Delaware. From Cooper's Corner to Moore's Mill, it followed the old road, but the route from Moore's Mill to a point south of Rising Sun was new.¹

1. Deed, Ignatius T. Cooper to State of Delaware, 1919, Kent County Deed Book U11, p. 40.

In 1922, the old road to Camden was improved by creating a new right-of-way south of the original road. Part of this right-of-way remains (state reference number 3a) as a spur between Route 13 and Governors Avenue. Much of the new road was obliterated when the present Route 13 (the Dover By-Pass) was built.²

When the Dover By-Pass of 1950 was built, Cooper's Corner was radically altered. The former farmland of the Coopers east of State Street was traversed by the new highway. The farmer at that time, George Pyott, had his buildings squarely in the new right-of-way. The new road, in fact, cut diagonally across the farm that Edmund Kearney sold to Thomas Nixon in 1743 (below). The new intersection of State Street and Route 13 stands on fill south of the original intersection, on what formerly was the "cripple" of Puncheon Run.

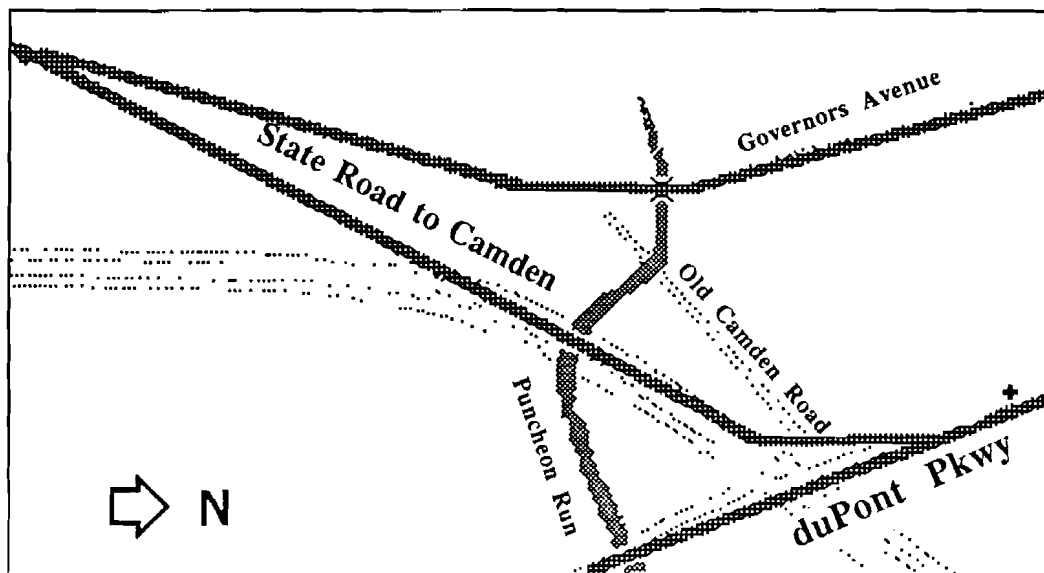


FIGURE 4: Sketch map of Cooper's Corner as it existed before 1952. Governors Avenue has been cut through to connect with the old road between Camden and Dover, and a new road has been built to connect Cooper's Corner with the old road. The original Camden road has been abandoned, at right.

2. Deed, E. W. Jenkins, Virginia Jenkins, Ignatius T. Cooper, and Amanda J. Cooper to State of Delaware, 1922, Kent County Deed Book H12, p. 444.

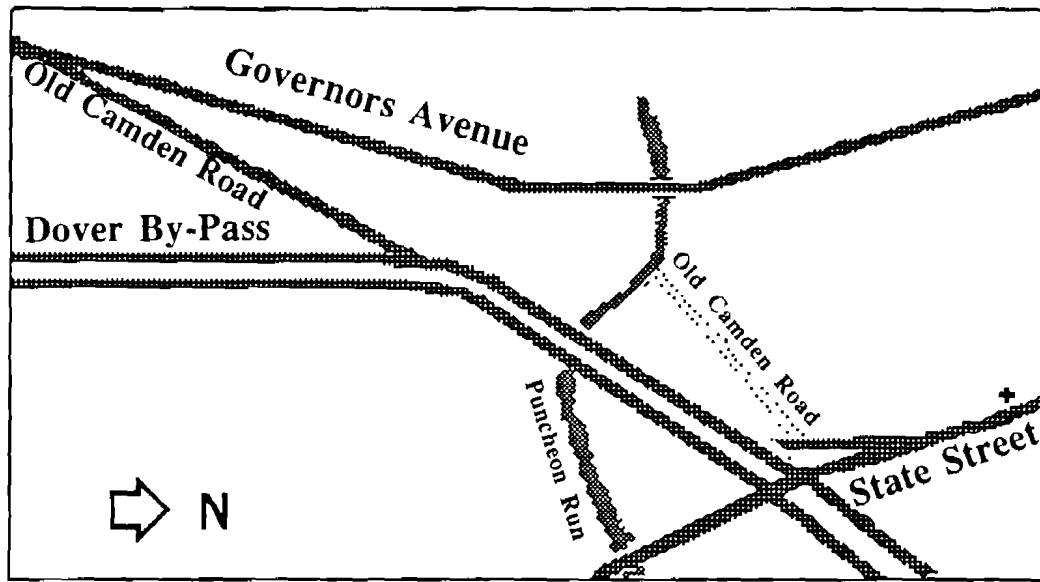


FIGURE 5: Sketch map of the road network at Cooper's Corner after construction of the Dover Bypass, now U. S. 13.

History of the Cooper farm

Scharf's *History of Delaware* offers this account of the Cooper farm, its buildings, and its early occupants:

'There was a saw-mill many years ago on Puncheon Run, owned by Judge Richard Cooper. It was abandoned about 1820. Judge Cooper lived on that part of 'Brother's Portion' purchased in 1699 by Richard Wilson from William Southebee. The Cooper mansion is an old brick buidling, now occupied by J. C. Tumbleson. Richard Cooper, father of the judge, came from England and settled in Maryland. His children were Hon. Richard Cooper, before mentioned; Dr. Ezekiel Cooper, who lived in Camden, and Dr. Ignatius Cooper, whose children are Richard G., a cashier at New Castle; Dr. Ezekiel W., of Camden; Dr. William H., State Senator, of Kenton; Ignatius T., lawyer and planter in Alabama; Alexander B., lawyer at Wilmington. Rev. Ezekiel Cooper, a brother of Judge Cooper, was a celebrated Methodist preacher."³

3. J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware* , 1888, p. 1085.

Scharf errs somewhat in this description, since the Wilson part of Brother's Portion lies north of the Cooper's Corner property (the Emerson tract on Figure 7, below). This part of Brother's Portion was sold to Edward Starkey in 1699. The Starkey family may have lived there; they certainly had enough business there for a landing on the St. Jones River to be known by their name. The first resident of whom we have certain evidence was Philip Kearney, who did not own the property. Kearney owned considerable other land, including Great Geneva on Tidbury Branch, but he evidently occupied this part of Brother's Portion as if he owned it.

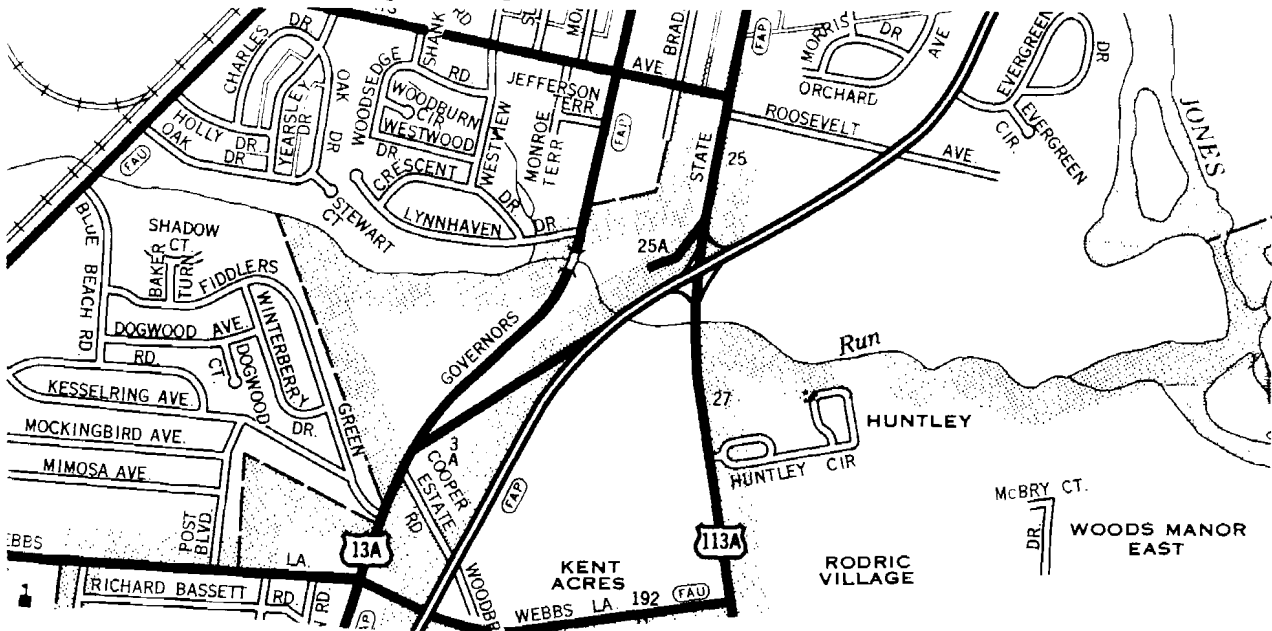


FIGURE 6: Detail of the current Delaware Department of Transportation Dover street map, showing the current configuration of the roads at Cooper's Corner.

Philip Kearney and his brother Michael came to Philadelphia from Ireland in about 1703. Michael married the daughter of Colonel Lewis Morris, president of the Council of New Jersey. Colonel Morris named his son-in-law treasurer of the colony. Michael and another brother Edmund were in business in Hampton, Virginia, and in North Carolina. In 1709, Philip and Michael bought 3,200 acres in Kent County from the England family and others. In 1718, they divided the holding and Philip took Great Geneva as his share.

In the fall of 1716, Michael was travelling south from New York to his home in Virginia with a Huguenot minister, John Fontaine. They stayed two nights with Philip Kearney before proceeding south. Fontaine remarked that "This gentleman hath an extraordinary good tannery which turns to account."⁴ A tannery requires low, flat ground with plentiful water, such as the "cripple" of Puncheon Run, but the Kearney tannery has not been located and is not mentioned in later documents.

4. Edward P. Alexander, editor, *The Journal of John Fontaine, an Irish Huguenot Son in Spain and Virginia 1710-1719* (Colonial Williamsburg, 1972), pp.119-120, 169, 174-175.

Philip was dead by 1723 when the deed to the adjacent property described the Starkey tract as being late of Philip Kearney deceased.⁵ In 1741, an Edmund Kearney of Philadelphia [who obviously was not Philip's brother Edmund] bought the property from William Starkey. This Edmund Kearney soon appears in the records as resident in Dover, where he bought lots.

Two years later, on February 14, 1743, he sold the Starkey farm to Thomas Nixon, a tailor of Dover. Kearney reserved for himself a ten-acre square to the west, but apparently never took possession of it. Nixon lived on the farm; in his will he described his dwelling plantation as being on the west side of the county road from Dover to Penals Mill, part of Brother's Portion. Of all the property Nixon owned, this could only have been the west side of today's State Street between Wyoming Avenue and Route 13, where the Cooper house [K-222] now stands.

Nixon's interests included land speculation. He acquired the opposite side of Puncheon Run below the bridge, where the mill later stood. He also owned several town lots and amassed 491 acres between Dover and Isaac's Branch. He and his sons were active in the Whig cause during the Revolution. Thomas Nixon, Jr. was clerk of the revolutionary Committee of Inspection in 1775 and Thomas Nixon signed the petition of Kent County freeholders that spring in favor of separation from Britain.⁶

The controversy came literally to their doorstep on June 10 when the local troop of light horse gathered at Puncheon Run for the purpose of attacking the Whig element in Dover led by the Rodneys. Thomas Nixon died in 1779, leaving a will. The estate was finally settled in 1794 when his daughter Letitia Coakley sold the plantation to Judge Richard Cooper.

Legend, repeated by Townsend (below) states that Judge Cooper lived in the house at Cooper's Corner. At his death, he left the farm and the mill on Puncheon Run to his son Richard Jenifer Cooper. Judge Cooper clearly planned to tie up his holding in entails forever, but his descendants had other ideas. As soon as his grandson William Parran Cooper reached the age of majority, he docked the entail in 1852. He sold the land east of the highway, 200 acres that eventually became the Pyott farm, to William R. Morris in 1855.

William Parran Cooper evidently lived in the house at Cooper's Corner until his death in 1861 and was buried in the family vault behind the house. In Beers' *Atlas* a few years later, Mrs. Cooper is indicated as owning two houses: the house at 1068 South State Street and a house that could be at or near today's 1154 South Governors Avenue. When Scharf was writing his 1888 history, the heirs of Parran Cooper were said to own the mansion, but it was occupied by tenants. By the end of her life, Mrs. Cooper had moved back into the old homestead. She and her daughter decreed that their bodies should be entombed in the family vault behind the house, but their heir soon sold off the homestead. It became a restaurant, first the Blue Hen Inn and finally the Nuts.

The sale to Arthur J. Kingsbury in 1908 was the beginning of a complex series of subdivisions that eventually converted the 77-acre Cooper home farm into an urban subdivision. Finally, by 1939, the house stood on the 2.35 acre city lot that it now occupies.

5. Deed , Ephraim Emerson and Mary his wife to Robert Gordon, October 11, 1723, Kent County Deed Book H1, p.56. Deeds recited in the descent of title, below, will not be noted in footnotes when the association is obvious.

6. Harold Hancock, Kent County Loyalists, *Delaware History* IV, pp. 115, 127.

The vault was standing on a vacant lot to the north as late as 1950, when the author saw it. According to local residents, the vault was bulldozed during construction of the building that now stands at 1040 South State Street. The present owner of the property, John Ed Norris, recalled to the author that the vault was brick with an iron door.

The street frontage between Wyoming Avenue (the Waples-Burton farm's boundary) and Cooper's Corner gradually developed after 1912. Among the earliest developments was the Dave Green feed store, built about 1928 and now occupied by Capitol Cleaners and others at 1102 South State Street. North of the Green property stands the large stuccoed house that was the home of Frank Minner, a builder and developer. Minner bought and sold several parcels in the neighborhood, finally subdividing the last vacant land in 1956.

On the east side of State Street, the primary development was the Carroll family complex. Where the Carroll's Corner Shopping Center now stands was a large auction building, that every Saturday attracted thousands of shoppers. The same family owned a farm-equipment dealership next door that currently is being liquidated.

Cooper's Corner in the American Revolution

Throughout the American Revolution, Delaware was rent by civil struggle between Whig and Tory elements. In 1776, the militia and civil leadership were by no means unanimous in their support of independence.

Early in June 1776, a respected elderly farmer and Assemblyman named Clarke came to Dover with a petition from Tory residents, opposing independence. For bearing this petition, Clarke was pilloried and pelted with eggs; members of the local light infantry were among his tormentors. On Sunday, June 9, the leadership of the Light Horse company decided to punish the infantry for violating the rights of Clarke and his conservative constituents. Richard Bassett, the leader of the cavalry, sent for his men to march on Dover, hang four of Clarke's tormentors, and burn the town.⁷

The secret was exposed, and the infantrymen arrested Bassett in his bed Monday morning. Two bodies of horsemen were poised to attack Dover. One group was about a mile above town, while a contingent from the south arrived at Puncheon Run at about nine a.m. The party at Cooper's corner twice sent demands to the infantrymen in town. A battle was averted when the two Dover ministers mediated a settlement, but the Tory rebellion spread through downstate Delaware.⁸

The lower counties declared their independence from the Penns and King George on June 15, but the battles begun at Cooper's Corner continued throughout the five-year war.

7. Harold B. Hancock, *Liberty and Independence* (Wilmington, 1976), p. 127.

8. Harold B. Hancock, *The Kent County Loyalists, Delaware History IV* (March and September 1954), pp. 132-133.